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### Two shifts

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## Two Shits

*A Connection of Some Kind*

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**ABSTRACT** This brief essay works and plays with “ordinary affect” as it flows amongst, through, and between two apparently different milieus—a university workplace and a comedy club. **KEYWORDS** Ordinary affect; Shit; Materiality; Bodies

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Ordinary affect is a surging, a rubbing, a connection of some kind that has an impact. It’s transpersonal or prepersonal—not about one person’s feelings becoming another’s but about bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water.

KATHLEEN STEWART, *ORDINARY AFFECTS*<sup>1</sup>

### ONE SHIT

This morning. My office. Early. Winter. It is dark, but I get the sense of light somewhere beyond, in hiding.

A silent room on a silent corridor. Except I hear the low, slow, relentless hum of the systems that keep this building breathing. Barely: it is a building on life support. It is difficult to make out, this hum; its specifics. Yes—that one. There. Hear it? Distant. Back. Back beyond the wall—that wall. Way back. Heating, I think. Yes, a boiler.

And *that* hum? Yes—pitched higher, nearer, in the room: my angle-poise lamp. I turn. The lamp illuminates one section of the lowest shelves of three full bookshelves, casting light on only the letters “R” and “S.” Richardson to Spry. Pelias, Tamas, and Thiem are just possible to make out. Adams and Žižek are cast into darkness, like the letters of hell.<sup>2</sup>

I use the lamp because the ceiling strip-light is aggressive. I never use it, except with a student or a colleague on a winter afternoon when the subtle light

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of the lamp seems ill-advised and unnerving. An insinuation of uncomfortable intimacy.

I hold still. Or try to. I wish my body would find tranquility, even if only for a moment. Allow itself to soothe and settle. Allow the currents to slow to just enough. Enough to keep moving, yes, to keep flowing, to keep alive; but this, what it does now, these days, and has been doing—this furious activity that wakes me with a start in the empty hours—is surely not entirely necessary.

Still.

Wait.

Listen.

Heating hum. Check.

Lighting hum. Check.

And then—an interruption. Water. Pipes. Waste. Shit. Somewhere in the building there must be someone else. I thought I was alone.

In the department office yesterday I knelt by a colleague's desk. (I kneel. It's a habit. To stand by her, or anyone, and talk from this height feels like standing over a wayward child who I want to intimidate.) I knelt. She apologized. She did not need to but she did. There's too much to do, she says. Whatever she does she's always behind. She will keep going and keep going, then take leave and on the first weekend get sick. Sick like the others who are not here because they have been made ill. I tell her please don't worry. I understand. And I know, as I say it, that understanding, such as it is, is impotent.

This is a sick building. Shit seeps from the pipes into the walls and through the floors, creeps through the cracks and the corners into our lives and into our bodies.

Still.

Wait.

Listen.

The pick, drop, rub, and scrape of construction outside the window. They start early, these men. The sweep of sand and cement. I can glimpse through my window pane, in the lamplight, scaffolding that spears skywards, leaving the tar-macked ground for shoes that scuff slow and quiet.

I seem only to sense, if at all, other bodies at this time of day. Later the rise of voices will bring their bodies to me through the crescent half-window one floor up.

I feel alone. The corridor is empty and dark. My neighbors' offices are empty and dark.

Breathe. Below my computer screen there is a card, blue and green, hand-drawn, a gift, a reminder for life, a reminder of life, a reminder of love. It speaks to me in black, irregular letters: “Don’t forget to breathe.”

## A SECOND SHIT

Tuesday 24 February. The Stand Comedy Club. York Place, Edinburgh.

You’ve been queuing outside for half an hour along the street where the trams run; you’re not the first in line, not the last, and you think you’re early enough to get a seat and, if you’re lucky, one with a table. It’s blowing a gale and though your coat is thick the chill cuts you between hood and face and you don’t chat with your mate; you just focus on trying to keep warm. The line starts to move at last and you head down the twisting black metal stairs to the club. It’s in the basement and it’s low through the door and you feel you have to stoop though you don’t. You pay your dues to the smiling member of staff with dyed red hair and it’s just a fiver for tonight’s show and you’ve ordered your tickets online so it’s easy; you show your credit card and you’re in. You pass another smiler on your left—she offers you a blue-yellow “Bright Club” badge with a duck, which you take. There’s the bar on your right, but you go straight to the spare table you’ve spotted because the bar can wait; and you and your friend sit, shed coats and scarves and gloves and fold them under your chair and you see the candy on the tables and you know it’s there to give you a sugar rush and make you more open to laughter and you think, “God, how manipulative.”

An hour later you’re on your third drink and the candy is all gone, what with you and your mate and the two girls in front of you with their backs to you whose drinks are on your table and who’ve been sharing the candy. There are no seats left anywhere and there are people behind you standing with their backs to the wall and their drinks on a shelf. There must be, you don’t know, about sixty or seventy people in here and it’s tight but you were never that good with numbers and especially not after a few drinks and a load of candy; and at last the lights dim and you know it’s been coming, what with the five-minute warning they gave you, and the announcer with the big Scottish voice says “Give a huge hand to your host for the evening—Jay Lafferty!” And she’s not what you’re expecting, she’s young and cute, and in a couple of paces from the door to the right she’s onto the stage; it’s only about the size of your table and she makes the room fill with her voice through the mic and you already like her because she’s relaxed and confident. She does the usual comedian thing of getting

people to put up their hands and seeing who's from where and taking the piss out of the English and asking the idiots who sat at the front where they're from and imitating their accents but she's kind and funny and everyone loves her. And she tells everyone what "Bright Club" is about (as if they didn't know): it's academics who are doing stand-up about their research and they're not professionals so don't give them a hard time, give her a hard time instead if you must, and if you do she'll fuck you over so don't bother trying.

Then she says to the guy at the front right at the end, okay so you start the clapping do you think you can do that, which makes him laugh, and then we'll go round the room, she says, as I sweep my arm across, like a wave, like a surge of laughter, and we'll invite the first act on stage; and give him a warm welcome and I know you're going to love him and he's going to make you laugh and think at the same time, please welcome to the stage Jonathan Wyatt, sweep sweep sweep, clap clap clap, a quiet grumble building to a cheer, almost, as he comes out from the same door on the right. He's carrying a tea cup—why a tea cup?—and he shuffles past a man with the longest legs you've ever seen, then the woman behind the guy who started the clapping then the guy himself who started the clapping, then past Jay Lafferty who's stepped back to give him just enough room. Then he's on the stage, that tiny wooden stage, and he puts his cup on the table in front of him where there are two people looking up and watching for what he's going to be like, and then he puts his right hand on the mic stand and his left on the mic and he takes the mic from the stand and lifts the stand and puts it behind him so it's out of the way; and he's wearing a flowery blue button-down shirt, like a shirt you wear when you're trying to be someone who performs stand-up; and he's in jeans and converse boots that you can just make out between the heads of the two girls and the bushy-haired bloke and the bearded bald one right near the front.

And he looks like he might be a bit nervous but he's not shaking or anything and then he says: "This isn't part of my set but you might like to know that doing stand-up is a very good laxative."

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Ordinary affects—which flow from and between bodies in rooms, in buildings, in spaces—with or of rooms, buildings, and spaces; affecting one another and generating intensities. Human bodies, discursive bodies, material bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water, sad bodies, troubled bodies. Laughing bodies, who

might say, in that moment of abandon, they couldn't give two shits about anything. ■

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JONATHAN WYATT is Senior Lecturer in Counselling and Psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh. His article with Beatrice Allegranti, "Witnessing Loss: A Materialist Feminist Account," won the 2015 Norman K. Denzin Qualitative Research Award. His recent books include *On (Writing) Families: Autoethnographies of Presence and Absence, Love and Loss*, co-edited with Tony E. Adams (Sense, 2014). Correspondence to: Jonathan Wyatt, School of Health in Social Science, University of Edinburgh, Medical School, Teviot Place, Edinburgh, EH8 9AG, UK. Email: jonathan.wyatt@ed.ac.uk.

#### NOTES

1. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 128.
2. Laurel Richardson, Tami Spry, Sophie Tamas, Annika Thiem, Tony Adams, and Slavoj Žižek.